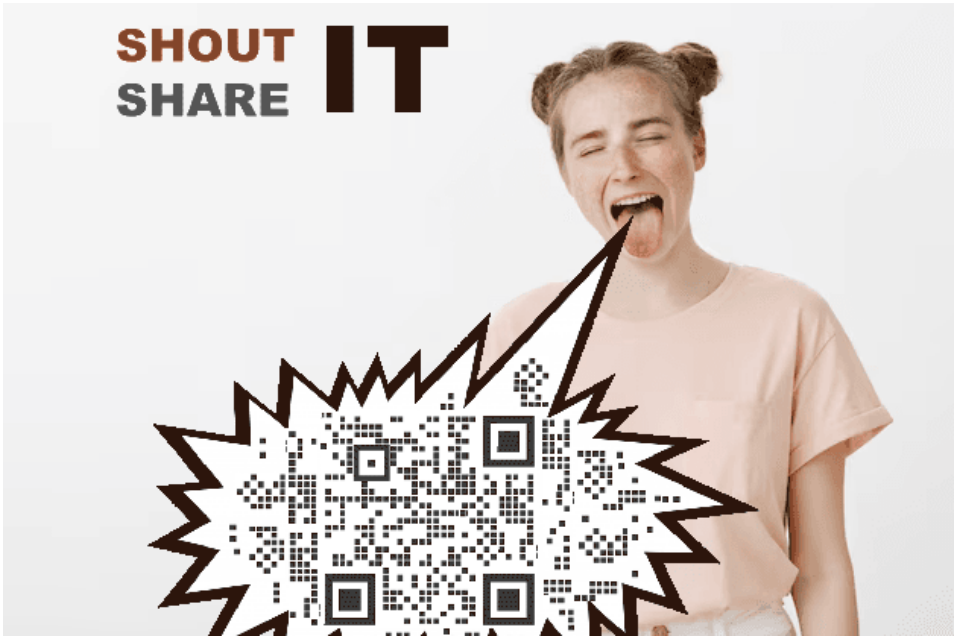
Trip to the Head

Ursula K. Le Guin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"Is this Earth?" he cried, for things had changed abruptly.

"Yes, this is Earth," said the one beside him, "nor are you out of it. In Zambia men are rolling down hills inside barrels as training for space flight. Israel and Egypt have defoliated each other's deserts. The *Reader's Digest* has bought a controlling interest in the United States of America/General Mills combine. The population of the Earth is increasing by thirty billion every Thursday, Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis will marry Mao Tse-Tung on Saturday, in search of security; and Russia has contaminated Mars with bread mold."

"Why then," said he, "nothing has changed."

"Nothing much," said the one beside him. "As Jean-Paul Sartre has said in his lovable way, 'Hell is other people.'"

"To Hell with Jean-Paul Sartre. I want to know where I am."

"Well then," said the other, "tell me who you are."

"I'm."

"Well?"

"My name is."

"What?"

He stood, his eyes filling with tears and his knees with palsy, and knew he did not know his name. He was a blank, a cipher, an x. He had a body and all that, but be had no who.

They stood at the edge of a forest, he and the other one. It was a recognizable forest, though rather dingy in the leaf, and damaged at the fringes by weedkiller. A fawn was walking away from them into the forest and as it went its name fell away from it. Something looked back at them with mild eyes from the darkness of. the trees before it vanished. "This is England!" cried blank, grasping the floating straw, but the other said, "England sank years ago."

"Sank?"

"Yes. Foundered. Nothing is left now but the topmost fourteen feet of Mt Snowdon, known as the New Welsh Reef."

At this blank also sank. He was crushed. "Oh," he cried on his knees, intending to ask somebody's help, but he could not remember whose help it was one asked. It began with a T, he was almost certain. He began to weep.

The other sat down on the grass beside him and presently put a hand on his shoulder, saying, "Come on now, don't lake it so hard."

The kindly voice gave blank some courage. He controlled himself, dried his face on his sleeve, and looked at the other. It was like him,

roughly. It was another. However, it had no name either. What good was it?

Shadow came into the eyes as Earth went round on its axis. Shadow slipped eastward and upward into the other's eyes.

"I think," blank said carefully, "that we should move out from the shadow of the, this, here." He gestured to the objects near them, large things, dark below and multitudinously green above, the names of which he could no longer remember. He wondered if each one had a name, or if they were all called by the same name. What about himself and the other, did they share a name in common, or did each have one of his own? "I have a feeling I'll remember better farther away from it, from them," he said.

"Certainly," said the other. "But it won't make as much difference as it used to."

When they came clear away from it into the sunlight, he at once remembered that it was called a forest and that they were called trees. However, he could not recall whether or not each tree bad a name of its own. if they did, be did not remember any of them. Perhaps he did not know these trees personally.

"What shall I do," he said, "what shall I do?"

"Well, look here, you can call yourself whatever you please, you know. Why not?"

"But I want to know my *real* name."

"That isn't always easy. But meanwhile you could just take a label, as it were, for ease of reference and conversational purposes. Pick a name, any name!" said the other, and held out a blue box named DISPOSABLE.

"No," said blank proudly, "I'll choose my own."

"Right. But don't you want a Kleenex?" Blank took a Kleenex, blew his nose, and said, "I shall call myself..." He halted in terror. The other watched him, mild-eyed. "How can I say who I am when I can't say what I am?"

"How would you find out what you are?"

"If I had anything—If I did something—"

"That would make you be?"

"Of course it would."

"I never thought of that. Well, then, it doesn't matter what name you're called by; any one will do; it's what you do that counts.

Blank stood up. "I will exist," he slated firmly. "I will call myself Ralph."

Whipcord breeches fitted close on his powerful thighs, the stock rose high on his neck, sweat clung in his thick, curly hair. He tapped his boots with his riding-crop, his back to Amanda, who sat in her old grey dress in the deep shade of the pecan tree. He stood in full

sunlight, hot with anger. “You’re a foot,” he said.

“Why Mr. Ralph,” came the soft lilting Southern voice, “Ah’m just a little bit stubborn.”

“You realize, don’t you, that Yankee as I am, I own all the land from here to Weevilville? I own this county! Your farm wouldn’t make a peanut-patch for one of my darkies’ kitchen gardens!”

“Indeed not. Won’t you come sit down in the shade, Mr Ralph? Youah gettin’ so hot out theah.”

“You proud vixen,” he murmured, turning. He saw her, white as a lily in her worn old dress, in the shade of the great old trees: the white lily of the garden. Suddenly he was at her feet, clasping her hands. She fluttered in his powerful grasp. “Oh Mr Ralph,” she cried faintly, “what does this mean?”

I am a man, Amanda, and you are a woman. I never wanted your land. I never wanted anything but you, my white lily, my little rebel! 1 want you, I want you! Amanda! Say you will be my wife!”

“Ah will,” she breathed faintly, bending towards him as a white flower stoops; and their lips met in a long, long kiss. But it did not seem to help at all.

Perhaps it ought to be moved up twenty or thirty years.

“You sick bitch,” he muttered, turning. He saw her, stark naked there in the shade, her back against the pecan tree, her knees up. He strode towards her unbuttoning his fly. They coupled in the centipede-infested crabgrass. He bucked like a bronco, she cried ululatingly, *Oooh! Aaah!* Coming coming coming come wow wow wow CLIMAX!

Now what?

Blank stood at a little distance from the forest and stared disconsolately at the other.

“Am I a man?” he inquired. ” Are you a woman?”

“Don’t ask me,” the other said, morose.

“I thought surely that was the most important thing to establish!”

“Not so damned important.”

“You mean it doesn’t *matter* if I am a man or a woman?”

“Of course it matters. It matters to me too. It also matters which man and which woman we are or, as the case may be, are not. For instance, what if Amanda was black?”

“But sex.”

“Oh, Hell,” said the other with a flare of temper, “bristleworms have sex, tree-sloths have sex, Jean-Paul Sartre has sex—what does it prove?”

“Why, sex is real, I mean really real—it’s having and acting in its intensest form. When a man takes a woman he proves his being!”

“I see. But what if he’s a woman?”

“I was Ralph.”

"Try being Amanda," the other said sourly.

There was a pause. Shadows were coming on eastward and upward from the forest over the grass. Small birds cried *jug, jug, tereu.* Blank sat hunched over his knees. The other lay stretched out, making patterns with fallen pine needles, shadowed, sorrowful.

"I'm sorry," blank said.

"No harm done," the other said. "After all, it wasn't real."

"Listen," blank said, leaping up, "I know what's happened! I'm on some kind of trip. I took something, and I'm on a trip, that's it!"

It was. He was on a' trip. A canoe trip. He was paddling a small canoe along a long, narrow, dark, shining stretch of water. The roof and walls were of concrete. It was pretty dark. The long lake, or stream, or sewer, slanted upward visibly. He was paddling against the current, uphill. It was hard work, but the canoe kept sliding forward upriver as silently as the black shining water moved back down. He kept his strokes quiet, the paddle entering the water silent as a knife in butter. His large black-and-pearl electric guitar lay on the forward seat He knew there was somebody behind him, but he didn't say anything. He wasn't allowed to say anything or even look around, so if they didn't keep up that was their lookout, he couldn't be called responsible. He certainly couldn't slow down, the current might get hold of his canoe and pull it right out from under him and then where'd he be? He shut his eyes and kept paddling, silent entry, strong stroke. There was no sound behind him. The water made no sound. The cement made no sound. He wondered if he was actually going forward or only hanging still while the black water ran hellbent beneath. He would never get out to daylight. Out, out—

Out. The other didn't even seem to have noticed that blank had been away on a trip, but just lay there making patterns with pine needles, and presently said, "How is your memory?"

Blank searched it to see if it had improved while he was away. There was less in it than before. The cupboard was bare. There was a lot of junk in the cellars and attics, old toys, nursery rhymes, myths, old wives' tales, but no nourishment for adults, no least scrap of possession, not a crumb of success. He searched and searched like a starving methodical rat. At last he said uncertainly, "I do remember England."

"Why surely. I expect you can even remember Omaha."

"But I mean, I remember being in England."

"Do you?" The other sat up, scattering pinestraw.

"You do remember being, then! What a pity England sank."

They were silent again.

"I have lost everything."

There was a darkness in the other's eyes and on the eastern edge

of the earth plunging down the steepening slopes of night.

"I'm nobody."

"At least," said the other, "you know you're human."

"Oh, what good's that? with no name, no sex, no nothing? I might as well be a bristleworm or a tree-sloth!"

"You might as well," the other agreed, "be Jean-Paul Sartre."

"I?" said blank, offended. Driven to denial by so nauseous a notion, he stood up and said, "I certainly am not Jean-Paul Sartre. I am myself." And so saying he found himself to be, in fact, himself; his name was Lewis D. Charles and he knew it as well as he knew his own name. There he was.

The forest was there, root and branch.

The other was, however, gone.

Lewis D. Charles looked in the red eye of the west and the dark eye of the east. He shouted aloud, "Come back! Please come back!"

He had gone at it all wrong, backwards- He had found the wrong name. He turned, and without the least impulse of self-preservation plunged into the pathless forest, casting himself away so that he might find what he had cast away.

Under the trees he forgot his name again at once. He also forgot what he was looking for. What was it he had lost? He went deeper and deeper into shadows, under leaves, eastward, in the forest where nameless tigers burned.